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S P E E C H

OF

BENJAMIN [✓]
WOOD, OF NEW YORK,

ON

THE STATE OF THE UNION,

IN THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, MAY 16TH, 1862.

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WASHINGTON, D. C.:
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1862.

S P E E C H.

Mr. WOOD. Mr. Chairman, I have hitherto avoided troubling this House. Content to be a listener, without any other participation in its proceedings than to oppose my solemn individual negative against measures which my conscience and my principles would not approve, I have said nothing. Indeed, sir, I have not had the heart to rise here and speak. A glance at this Hall, of itself, has been enough to prevent. When I look around and see one third of the Union unrepresented here, and find myself in a body, purporting to be one branch of the Congress of the United States, really in fact but a fragmentary part of it, my heart sinks within me. It appears to be a sectional body—a gathering of the representatives of a sectional party. With these feelings, and with this spirit, I have until now avoided participating in debate.

Besides, sir, during the earlier period of this session, disaster had accompanied the efforts of the Federal arms. I felt that the hour of defeat was not a fit one in which to strive to awaken the great soul of the North to thoughts of peace; I felt that something was due to the sense of mortification, something to the natural desire to retrieve the shame of discomfiture. I hoped, too, that when victory should perch upon our banners, others than myself would seize the occasion to urge a plea in behalf of peaceable measures; and that this Government itself, feeling secure and strong enough to be magnanimous, would take the lead and be the pioneer in opening a path for the settlement of our difficulties without further recourse to bloodshed. I even hoped that the leaders of the now dominant party, moved by the sore distress which has visited our country, would relent from the stern rigor of their doctrine of subjugation, and, in the flush of triumph,

would lean a little towards a gentler policy than that which they have heretofore championed with so much zeal and with so little forbearance.

I hoped in vain. The triumph came; a long train of successes has relieved the North from its humiliation. The Government claims now to stand as a rock against which the tempest of opposition must waste itself in futile efforts. The partisans of the ultra war party laugh to scorn the idea that any effectual resistance can be offered to the onward march of our triumphant armies, and yet no single effort has been made in these congressional Halls to stay the effusion of blood. It has been left for me, powerless as I am, to speak the first conciliatory word in behalf of my countrymen. And I do it, sir, in the hope that others, more capable, will not be too much engrossed with the lust of conquest and the pride of victory, to follow my example.

Sir, it is an ineffaceable reproach to those either deluded or wicked men who, in the North, by their unwearied agitation of abolition schemes, have stirred the embers of this strife; it is an eternal reproach to them that, through defeat and victory, throughout every phase of this unhappy struggle, with the groans of their distressed and tortured country smiting upon their ears, they have clung, and still cling, with unpitying pertinacity, and even with ferocity, to the doctrine which has been the germ of all the mischief. With the first exulting shouts of Federal victories they set up the echoing cry of emancipation. With all the energy of fanaticism, with all the subtle arts and intrigues of scheming demagogues, with all the appliances of cunning, intellect, and patronage at their command, even at this eventful crisis, when every American brain should be at work to bring about a fair and honorable peace, they have no thought, no hope, no duty but to propagate their creed, extending its influence into every nook and corner of the land, and poisoning the atmosphere of these sacred Halls with its interminable discussion. Openly and in secret, by the agency of the press, the pulpit, and the political rostrum, in the camp, in the city, and in the open field, they are spreading the contagion; they are inoculating the country with this moral pestilence which has already brought us where we are, to the very brink of the grave of our nationality.

Sir, to these apostles of abolitionism will be traced hereafter whatever of evil has befallen or may befall our country. They are building its sepulchre with the bones of their slaughtered countrymen. I do believe there are gentlemen within my vision now, whose sworn purpose, whose first desire, paramount even to the preservation of Republicanism, is emancipation. They and their disciples

first threw the apple of discord. They first applied the torch, and are now more busy than ever with throwing fresh fuel to the flame. Should history ever trace—which God forbid—the record of this country's ruin, that page will seem the strangest to those that read which shall tell of the madness and wickedness of the arch-fanatics of abolitionism. In the dark recesses of the temple of infamy, the gloomiest niches will bear the inscription of their names.

Sir, I counsel none but a moral interference with the work of these mischief-makers. I would not have even fanaticism deprived of the right of free speech! nor would I, in any emergency, advocate the slightest infringement by the Government upon the liberty of the press. Let them sow the seeds of their infamous doctrine broadcast over the land. Whatever may be the danger, I will not countenance the greater danger of establishing a dictatorship over the thoughts of my fellow-countrymen.

But if the abominable theme must be brought into the Council Chambers of the nation, for the sake of decency, if not of justice, let it be at a more suitable time. If there remains one Union man at the South, let us remember that he is unrepresented here; that the subject of slavery particularly concerns him, and that it is ungenerous and unjust, if not cowardly, to take advantage of his absence to push forward measures in regard to the local institutions of his section; measures against which, were he present, he would give his earnest opposition. It will quench whatever remains of Union feeling at the South, if it has not already done so. It will destroy the last hope of a reconstruction of the Union on a friendly basis. It will prove that the first idea of the dominant party in the North is active and unwavering antagonism to slavery, and a fixed purpose to legislate it out of the land at all hazards. Is it thus that we are to conquer a peace? Sir, we are flinging away the last chances of reconciliation as recklessly as madmen cast their treasures into the sea. The agitation of the subject has been the country's bane at every period of its history; its discussion at this crisis is desperate self-destruction. Is it while the magazine is beneath us and about us, bursting with the agencies of ruin, that we must choose to sport with the flaming torch of the incendiary? Sir, until our beloved country shall be saved, the word "emancipation" should, by common consent, be banished from the language of debate in this assemblage. It is a spell which has wrought enough already of desolation. It is a hellish formula of incantation which has conjured up the fiends of discord and civil war; and it never was so potent in its evil tendency as now, when it is being passed, like the breath of the plague, from mouth to mouth, in the Council

Chambers of the country which it has ruined. It should be spoken in a whisper and with a prayer linked to it, as a thing that brings a curse and spreads a pestilence. I despair of my country, I despair of ever living once more in a blessed Union of fraternal States, when I hear all around me the utterance of that ruin-breeding word "emancipation," mingling with the shouts of battle, the fierce huzzahs of triumph over fallen brothers, and the groans of our dying countrymen.

Sir, if in place of making the negro question a subject-matter of debate, this Congress would take into earnest, solemn consideration some expedient for securing peace, I do believe that success would crown our efforts. If they would enter upon that task, not with hearts embittered and intellects swayed by sectional antipathies and mock philanthropy, but with all their souls devoted to that one sacred purpose—the reconstruction of the Union and our redemption from civil war; if they would do this, in the spirit of conciliation, of forgiveness, of tolerance, of brotherhood, and kindly feeling, it is my conviction that before the close of this eventful session, the preliminaries of a peace would be arranged. But while, with the obstinacy of a blind fanatic, and the instinct of a brutal gladiator, the first object is to promulgate a party creed, and the second to crush an opponent and wear the badge of victory, I see no fairer prospect than, at some distant period, reached through seas of blood and heaps of carnage, the forced submission of a crushed and devastated section, and the equally unhappy spectacle of a Government triumphant, but exhausted by its triumph, detested by a moiety of those sovereignties that gave it birth, and gazing with horror and remorse upon the desolation it has wrought.

Sir, it is not my intention to vent reproaches, even where I believe them best deserved. I have risen to enter my protest against the discussion, in this Chamber, of any anti-slavery scheme whatever at this crisis, and to offer an earnest appeal to this Congress that its legislation shall embrace every means of securing an immediate peace. If, as the Government claims, the confederate cause is hopeless, the leaders of the secession movement cannot be ignorant of the fact; and knowing it, they will be naturally inclined to lend a willing ear to whatever proper overtures this Government may present. At some period of this struggle there must be negotiation; it must be resorted to, sooner or later; why not now?

Is it because pride forbids that we should be the first to stretch out the hand of conciliation? Heaven forefend that thousands of human lives and a country's welfare should depend upon so false a principle. Is it because the South has not

been sufficiently punished, humbled, and subdued? Then let us confess that chastisement and vengeance are the objects of this war. Is it because the anti-slavery movement has not yet received a sufficient impetus? If so, go tell it to the armies that have won your victories! Make abolition the war-cry! Place a banner with that device in the vanward, and lure those armies on to conquest with it—if you can. Your soldiers would rend the treacherous ensign into shreds, and would march to their homes with the same alacrity with which they pushed on to the battle-field.

What, then, is the cause that withholds negotiation? You will not parley with armed treason! But you have parleyed with armed treason, if that be the word; parleyed for the mere convenience of an exchange of prisoners, and other purposes to mitigate the grievances of war. It was your duty so to do. And shall you not do so to accomplish all that your troops are fighting for—the reconstruction of the Union?

Let us suppose that the South is anxious to embrace an opportunity of return, and is withheld from making advances by doubts as to the intentions of the North: is it not right that we should confer with them, that those doubts may be removed? What do the people care for such miserable punctilio in the hour of a nation's agony? Sir, an honorable peace is within the grasp of this Congress without further bloodshed. This Congress knows that it is so, and when the people shall realize that it is only the infamous design to strengthen the anti-slavery movement that prevents an effort to obtain that peace, woe to the chiefs of the abolition party in the land.

But, enough of them. Words are thrown away upon their stubborn fanaticism. I appeal with better hope to the loftier feelings that should pervade humanity, and especially pervade this august assemblage; that should, by the nature of its sacred functions, be far removed from the miserable ambition of reducing a section of our common country to the extreme and therefore dangerous condition of despair.

Sir, there may be a fascination in the gory magnificence of war. There may be a craving for martial glories in the hearts of men, and an instinct of contention which we share in common with the brute creation. But if ever there can be a time when a more Christian impulse should possess our souls, it is now; now, when triumph and the consciousness of strength give us the noble privilege of extending the hand of conciliation without fear of degradation, or of self-reproach for cowardice. If adversity has been our excuse for sternness let success be our

plea for magnanimity. Providence has placed within the reach of the North a greater triumph than countless armed legions could conquer; the triumph of subduing a brave enemy with a generous and merciful policy, that will disarm resentment and rekindle the old brotherly flame that perhaps is not yet totally extinct. For, after all, they are our brothers, sir; and some softening of the stern Roman rigor which our rulers have assumed is due to that brotherhood, which, by untimely severity, may be canceled now forever. There are gentlemen who will say that the South must be subdued; that every armed southerner must throw down his weapon and sue for mercy. Should a freeman ask so much of his brother freeman? Would they be worthy of companionship in our fraternity, being reclaimed at such a sacrifice of manly feeling? What would you have them do? Would you have them crouch and cringe and strew their heads with ashes and kneel at your gates for readmission? They are *Americans*, sir, and will not do it. No! though Roanoke and Henry and Donelson should be re-enacted from day to day through the lapse of bloody years, they will not do it. Give them some chance for an honorable return, or you will wipe out every hope, and the two sections will be twain forever. Yes, sir! you may link them to each other with chains, and pin their destinies together with bayonets, but at heart they will be twain forever. They are the children of the same heroic stock, the joint inheritors with ourselves of the precious legacy of freedom; and it is a sacrilege and an insult to the memories of the past, that so many, sir, should sit in your presence here to-day to goad them on to desperate resistance, and so few—alas! so very few—to mediate and restrain.

Of those few, I thank my God that I am one. I am proud to proclaim it here beneath the dome of the Capitol. I shall proclaim it, here and everywhere, until the wings of peace shall be once more folded over the bleeding bosom of my country. I shall proclaim it aloud and honestly, although to do so would make me the next victim of this cruel strife.

Sir, it may be said that I speak of peace, while its attainment, without further recourse to arms, remains impossible. I do not believe it impossible. What effort has been made? What door has been opened through which the passions and ill-feelings of the contestants might pass out and reason enter? None. The single idea has been forced upon the people that the sword, and the sword alone, must decide the issue. It has been pronounced treason to hold an opposite opinion. Sir, if to have but little faith in the efficacy of the sword for joining severed friendships, if to earnestly desire peace and deprecate the horrors of war,

be treason, then am I a traitor ; and I am prouder of such treason than others can be of their vindictive, flaming, and pretentious patriotism.

I conjure this Congress, in the name of our suffering country, in the names of wives that may be widows, of children that may be orphans, in the names of gallant men, now strong in health, and who, to-morrow, may be stretched in death upon the gory ground, or writhing, maimed, and disfigured, with tormenting wounds—in the name of humanity, that sickens at the daily record of this terrible strife, I conjure this Congress to seize at the merest chance that may exist of a present termination of this tragedy. Let something be attempted in the spirit of mediation. Sir, the people will respond to it. They will thank this Congress for it. They will bless this Congress for any measure that breathes of the spirit of reconciliation. They are weary of this war, weary in despite of the excitement of present victory. They will awake soon to the consciousness that such victories are purchased at a sacrifice terrible to contemplate ; that a national debt is created, which, in its rapid accumulation, is appalling—a debt which, if ever paid, will press like an incubus upon future generations, stunting the growth and paralyzing the vigor of our young Republic; or, if repudiated, resting a blot upon our annals.

If we look abroad the spectacle tends only to our shame. We see the sceptered hands of Europe planting their royal banners upon the soil of this western hemisphere, which it is our natural duty to consecrate to republicanism, and which we might at least have guarded from the greed of foreign despots. The flag of Arragon and Castile flaunts in the air of San Domingo, and, united with the blazonries of France and England, is unfurled upon the walls of San Juan de Ulloa. Where may they not float a twelve months hence, if we, the natural guardians of this continent, should still be busy dabbling in each other's gore ? Sir, if there must be war, let it be against the natural enemies of republicanism ; if we must humble our national pride to conciliate the British lion, let us make some sacrifice to win back in amity the South, that we may stand once again as comrades in arms, to scourge these foreign interlopers within their proper limits.

I am no advocate of bloodshed, but if a foreign war should be the alternative of submission to foreign insolence, I trust that I should be among the last to fall prostrate that the hurricane might sweep harmless by. To subserve the schemes of a party, we have already humiliated the American people in the eyes of scoffing Europe ! It will be a task hereafter to regain the caste we have lost in the

family of nations. No greater evil could befall us than to be forced from the position we have hitherto assumed towards foreign Powers! I would not have my country swerve one inch from any vital principle of her foreign policy in any emergency whatever. Above all things I hold dear that national honor which we have ever, till of late, preserved untarnished. However gloomy may be the aspect of things at home, I would have our flag float as proudly as ever abroad, not deigning to make domestic affliction a plea for humility, an excuse for cowardice, or a palliation of national dishonor. Whenever the occasion demands that a stand should be made against foreign aggression, or a rebuke administered to foreign pride, or a chastisement inflicted upon foreign insolence, I would have the gauntlet thrown down upon the impulse of the national sentiment, without reference to domestic exigencies, or pausing to measure the strong proportions of the foe.

In the heat of our private discord, we seem to have forgotten that our great mission as a people, is to republicanize the world, to advance the principle that men are capable of self-government, and to check the progress of monarchy. Sir, we are losing ground in the fulfillment of that sacred mission, and monarchy has gained a new foothold, while we have been weakening our sinews with intestine strife. To what purpose? Is it possible that gentlemen can hope to reconstruct the Union by pursuing a policy of unrelenting severity? Can they expect to re-establish concord and brotherly love by pushing hostilities to the extreme verge? What is the Union worth without mutual respect and reciprocal amity to bind the sections? What! a Union of unwilling States, driven into companionship at the point of the bayonet, and held there by military power! Such a Union would not be worth the shedding of one brave man's blood. We want their hearts, or we want them not at all. And we cannot conquer hearts with bayonets, although they should outnumber the spears of Xerxes. If not brought back by negotiation, they are gone from us forever. To conquer them may be possible. To slay their soldiers, lay waste their lands, and burn their cities may be within our power. But to hold them in subjection, would, in itself, be a final repudiation of the first principle of republicanism. Prosecute this war until you have accomplished the necessity of holding a subtile section in subjection, and the world will look in vain for a republic on the western hemisphere.

Sir, I love to entertain the hope that our Union will be restored upon the foundation laid down by our fathers; and I desire no changes in the plan of that

glorious superstructure. But I am not so unnatural a worshiper of the Union as to seek its salvation with the destruction of those for whose welfare it was conceived; to build it up upon the dead bodies of my countrymen. I would purchase its redemption otherwise than by anarchy and ruin. I would not fling away the substance to perpetuate the name. Every drop of blood that is shed in this struggle will weaken the bond of union between us. One word of conciliation at this crisis will do more to save the country than all the achievements, past and to come, of your victorious soldiery.

Why should not that word go forth, even now, in the hour of the triumph of the Federal arms. If there has ever been a period in the history of republics when prolonged civil strife has failed to curtail the liberty of the masses, I have not read that history aright. Already, with one year's bitter experience, we have beheld some of the dearest privileges of American citizenship wrested from our grasp. And how long, at the same rate, before, upon the convenient plea of necessity, we shall be stripped of other rights which heretofore have made us deem ourselves freemen? How long, while personal liberty even now depends on the nod of an official? How long, while free-born American citizens can be left to languish in bastiles, beyond the reach of the constituted tribunals of the land and at the mercy of the Executive? How long, while the press, the guardian of liberty, the friend of the masses, is shackled, gagged, cowed down to sullen silence, or, worse yet, become the minion of a party? How long, while voters are arrested at the polls by military process, and legislators are hurried off to prison before they can assume their sacred functions? How long, while the partisans of the abolition party are coining money out of the blood of their countrymen, parading their showy patriotism and shouting "Union," with their arms up to the elbows in the public Treasury? How long, sir, will the people of the North, taxed beyond endurance, robbed and cheated by an ever-craving horde of political hyenas—how long will they have a choice between freedom and anarchy, between a republic and a despotism? Alas! we still cling to the name of a republic, but have we the reality? It is entirely at the option of one man, or of a council of men, whether the citizen shall breathe in freedom the free air of Heaven. At the "*open sesame*," of the Executive, the gloomy portals of the Bastiles La Fayette or Warren will gape to receive him. And this is the Republic I was taught to love!

Sir, this is only a symbol of what must inevitably be, should the South be crushed into the Union. You may bring the South to terms with your bayonets,

but when you have done so, you will have made a bond of air; a covenant whose seal will be a military despotism; and to break it at the first opportunity will be an aim and a purpose on the part of the subdued section. What they have attempted once they will not fail to attempt again, when smarting under the remembrance of defeat, when cherishing the deadly hate that a war to the utterance will engender.

For the sake of union now and of union hereafter—not an enforced union, but the strong union of willing hearts—let the word of peace go forth, let the hand of reconciliation be extended. Why, sir, I have heard such words of bitter hatred expressed towards these southerners by northern lips, that I fear it may be already too late ever to renew the bonds of fraternity. Such sentiments, I have heard of implacable resentment, of thirsting vengeance, of sectional antipathy, as Hannibal was taught to nurture against Rome, as Rome, in her quenchless jealousy, conceived towards Carthage to the end. And the doom of Carthage may be accepted by the South rather than reunion at the bayonet's point.

I appeal to this Congress to avert that fate as inglorious to the victor as to the vanquished. Let the door of negotiation be flung wide open, flung open now, while we can make advances with good grace, and with laurels upon our brow. To the winds with the doctrine that you will not treat with armed traitors. It is a sentiment fitter for the epoch of a purpled Roman, than for the Christian age in which we live. It is the sentiment of one who rules with a rod of iron, not of a great and generous people who assume to rule themselves. Enough has been done in proof of the valor of the North, and the resources of the Government. Let something be now done for the sake of the past; for the sake of the memories of the Revolution, of the struggle of 1812, of the battle-fields of Mexico; for the sake of a Union whose cement shall be forgiveness for the past, and friendship and forbearance for the future.

In place of exulting over victories, and longing for new triumphs, how much more pleasant and more holy to draw a picture of the joy that will pervade many a now gloomy household when the glad tidings of peace shall be borne from city to village, from village to homestead, from lip to lip, and heart to heart. A nation's jubilee would well repay you for some little yielding of your stern policy. How many arms would be outstretched, how many hearts would bound to give a "welcome home again!" to the war-stained volunteer. Oh! sir, those meetings at the cottage threshold, those claspings at the farm-house porch, those cleavings of the throbbing bosoms of women to scarred and manly breasts, were

worth all the laurels that were ever snatched from blood-stained fields. The news of our victories has been hailed with peans and illuminations; but, with the first tidings of peace, there is not a hovel in the land that would not have a candle at its window; not a palace that would not blaze with splendors in token of the advent of a blessing, priceless beyond all earthly triumphs.

Then, sir, let us lower the points of our victorious swords, and parley with the foe while the bugle blasts of victory are yet ringing in our ears. If we are free in anticipation from the peril of future reverses; if we are sanguine that the Federal arms are henceforward gifted with invincibility, that is the noblest reason why we should say to our opponents, "pause, if you will; reflect." Let us yield them one chance for reconciliation, before we drive them to the resistance of despair. There can be no victory where kith and kin, where brothers and fellow-countrymen, where men who are bound to each other by the holiest of past associations, are struggling for supremacy. All is defeat; all is disaster; all is misfortune, tears, and mourning. Do not let us efface with blood every sacred memory that may yet bind these men to us as brothers. Give one sign of invitation before the death struggle is renewed. Let the spirit of forgiveness pass between the lines of those opposing hosts, and with the blessings of Providence, those armed legions will take a lesson from Sabina and early Rome, whose soldiers, united by domestic ties, threw down their weapons upon the battle's verge, and sprang to each other's embrace.

Sir, I have spoken freely, studying only to make my words an index to my thought. My opinions have brought upon me the censure, often most discourteously expressed, of many who differ with me; but for that I care but little. I am content to bide the hour that shall set me right before my countrymen. As I have believed the prosecution of this war to be a widening of the gulf that separates the sections, I have earnestly opposed it. I have always looked upon the subjugation of the South as a project, whose fulfillment would strike a heavy, perhaps a fatal blow, to true republicanism; and although I will yield to no man in devotion to the Union, although I would make any and every personal sacrifice to restore its glory and integrity, I will never consent, even for the sake of that Union, to yield up my birthright as a free man; to sacrifice those principles of self-government, those rights of free speech, free thought, and personal liberty, without which Union is but a mockery and a name.

It is not grandeur and extent of territory that I covet as the chief attributes of the Government under which I am to live. Were I one of but a single community,

insignificant in numbers, but secure in a guarantee of pure republican ministration of affairs, I would be proud of my citizenship. But the union of a thousand States, each one as great and populous as the noble one among whose Representatives I have the honor to be, I would detest, yes, sir, in my most inmost heart I would detest it, if the holding together of its component parts should create a necessity for the assumption of despotic power.

Self-government is the god of my political idolatry, and the Union is but a temple in which I have worshipped it. Should that temple be destroyed, I would not forsake the creed, nor would the mighty principle be buried in the ruins. I love and would preserve the temple, for beneath its roof are gathered the treasures of holy past associations; upon its hallowed walls are inscribed the names of patriots, from the North and from the South, whose blood has been its cement. But rather would I have the glorious fabric crumble to the dust, than see the spirit of despotism enshrined within its sacred precincts.

I have seen already the silent but lengthening shadow of absolutism creeping into this sacred asylum. And when the Executive hand, for the first time in our history, was interposed between the citizen and his rights, the germ was planted of a danger mightier than rebellion in its most gigantic phase; for I believe encroachments by an Executive to be in itself rebellion against the only sovereignty I acknowledge—the majesty of the people. I believe each step towards absolutism to be more fatal to the welfare of the Republic than any possible act within the power of the citizen to conceive and execute. I will resist every grasp that may be made upon an attribute of sovereignty not heretofore acknowledged to the Chief Magistracy; for reason and instinct, no less than the fearful examples that history has furnished from the ashes of republics, teach me that the first step, unchecked, will not be the last, but only the precursor of those giant strides by which, over the necks of betrayed freemen, ambitious men have mounted to a throne.

We want a Union, sir, of sovereigns, not of subjects. And that our Government shall extend over a vast area, to me is of less moment than that it should be purely, strictly, and unequivocally republican at all times and under all conditions.

Sir, I have done. I have only to reiterate my hope and my entreaty that this Congress, which has in sacred charge the welfare of our country, will adopt some measure which may bring about a cessation of hostilities, with a view to negotiation. That done, I am firm in my belief that hostilities will not be resumed.

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